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Organizational theorists are contrasted in terms of the interpretive perspective. An example is provided from the author's work with police sergeants through which the "interpretive" method is illustrated. Some commentary on fruitful theoretical directions for interpretive work is provided.

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Some thoughts (and afterthoughts) on context, interpretation, and organization theory[1]

John Van Maanen

I explore in this paper several frequently misunderstood
points associated with the interpretive stance toward organ-
ization theory (a stance roughly consistent with the Burrell
and Morgan (1979) notion of "interpretive paradigm"). I begin
by formulating a dichotomy and then attempt to dissolve the
dichotomy; first, by example, and, second, by discourse. In
the end, I suggest that there is no dichotomy for, viewed
broadly, we are all theorists of the interpretive sort. The
distinctions that remain among organization theorists are
twofold: (1) the level of interpretation at which one choses
to work; and (2) the degree to which one's interpretive
standards are recognized and made public.

* * * * * *

It seems to me that within the small community of organizational theorists

there exist two broad schools of thought as to the purpose(s) of our activities.

On the one hand, there are model-builders or paradigm-seekers who believe that

the enterprise exists to solve problems; intellectual problems often, but,

fundamentally, problems associated with the practical difficulties certain members

of organizations face.[2] The results of the endeavor are (among other things)

nomethetic statements about what is thought to be true across social space and

time. Certainly, within this school, some impressive results of the statistical

and predictive sort have been acheived. I am thinking here of various economic

models of the firm, the sociology of groups and intergroup relations, and, with

a few more qualms, the social psychology of individual behavior in the workplace.

In the ideal case, the model-builders work is well defined, ordered or rule-

governed, and relatively open for inspection -- at least to those who know

how and where to look for violations of the methodological codes. Moreover,

there is some hope within this school that eventually consensus is possible

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among theorists regarding the good models and bad. It is in this sense that a sort of Kuhnian paradigm for organizational theory is thought possible.

In contrast, there are context-builders for whom the existence of some sort of model (any model) is taken-for-granted be it a model of the folk or academic variety. Ambition in this domain is directed toward explaining how given models work (or do not work) in terms that are not explicitly apparent in the model itself. The intellectual activity for the context-builder lies in discovering and elaborating what lies behind, beneath, above the conceptual units embedded within a model. This counterposition in organizational theory is marked by an almost obsessive concern for meaning; again, in both the academic-formal and folk-ordinary sense. If a model-builder is content with establishing a correspondence or relation between two apparently distinguishable phenomena, the context-builder will seek to understand what it is one must know to lay claim to such a correspondence. If salaries are directly associated with status within a given range and in certain locales, what is it about salary and status within this range and location that produce such a relation? What is it that salaries say or signify to people that is realized in status (and vice-versa)? What assumptions does such a correspondence rest upon? And, ultimately, what ends are to be served by such a relation? To build a model banking on the covariation of salary and status is not to explain the relation no matter how often it empirically can be said to appear. If explanations rest upon context, no paradigm for organization theory is possible.[3]

To establish a context is to break with formal category systems since actor specificity, point of view, social and personal history, and, in Garfinkel's (1967) superb phrase, "situational particulars" represent the building blocks of analysis. If exchange theory is to predict, for example, the expected or realized pay increase of the water-walking, high-potential,

boy-wonder manager, it must do so within a context that carries a logic for such a prediction. The logic is what is sought by the context-builder, not a general theory of exchange. But, there can be as many logics as there are contexts within which to cast the relationship and each logic carries a potential to serve different masters. It is in this sense, then, a paradigm for the context-builder is but a fanciful and fictive notion.

I draw this distinction because the interpretive tradition falls in the context-building or antiparadigm domain. Here, interest in the practical problems of the world is perhaps less keen than the interest in why certain practical matters are seen as problematic in the first place. Gusfield (1980) artfully demonstrates such a difference (and the implications flowing from such difference) in his analysis of the creation of public (and, by implication, organizational) problems. The materials for his study concern the Drunk Driver -- in this society, an object of a somewhat smirking scorn and occasional dismay. By establishing the context within which the label and image of the Drunk Driver is used, Gusfield evocatively displays how such a "menace" is, in fact, not what it seems at all. The Drunk Driver is rather a label and image built from and maintained by the linguistic/conceptual categories we use (e.g., traffic accidents, blood alcohol levels, antisocial behavior, demon run, killer drunks, etc.) and by the social organization in place (and growing) to make the "menace" visible (e.g., National Safety Council, the police, the courts, the official records, etc.).^{4} By illuminating the context, the social theories and models surrounding drunk driving assume a myth-like form (although a carefully plotted myth of obvious value to multiple groups within the society). What Gusfield shows is that there is no simple meaning or natural order standing behind the object of his analysis; the meaning is found in the social practices surrounding the object, not in the object itself.

The point is well-captured by Gusfield's (1980:51) own remark: "We live in a forest of symbols on the edge of a jungle of facts." The way such facts become seen and ordered for us is dependent upon the appeal of the symbols that allow us to see the facts in the first place. To build context is to seek the symbols which stand behind the manner in which people make their world meaningful. It is to nit-pick conventional wisdom, to find exceptions to the normal, to quibble over supposed matters-of-fact, and, most notoriously, to be skeptical of generalized statements. It is from this perspective that interpretive theories of social action are constructed.

Such theories are however often misunderstood. It is virtually a cliché in organizational studies to premise one's analysis with remarks of the sort: "A grounding assumption of this study is that social life is meaningful, that actions are significant and reflective of the actors' intention" (Van Maanen, 1977:46). Such statements give rise to a relatively narrow view of interpretive theory and method. More pointedly, such statements suggest the interpretive theorist seeks only the interpretation of the actor for a given action. This is the so-called information processing or social constructionist view in organization theory.^{5} Stated in rough and ready form, human behavior is perspectival, dependent upon what actors believe they are doing. The social constructionist seeks then to describe actions in light of the justifications arrived at by the actors themselves. This is indeed an important matter and cannot be merely cast aside by the perfectly obvious remark that actors often don't know what they are doing or that they are often mistaken as to the causes and consequences of their action. This is of course true but fails to appreciate the multileveled explanations developed by interpretive theorists, explanations that go well beyond reductive, actor dependent ones.

A much broader depiction of the interpretive tradition (and one I regard as far more appropriate) puts emphasis upon the background -- context and

world -- within which interpretations are developed. It is, in brief, a cultural description and understanding that is sought through the use of interpretive methods and theory. The raw materials for such understanding represent actor interpretations or presented accounts but such materials are merely the starting point for analysis. There is nothing inherently correct or compelling about actor interpretations. Though the calculas of action is dependent upon what people think they are doing, such thinking is hardly an autonomous nor necessarily creative act in and of itself.[6] An example drawn from my own work will perhaps best illustrate what it is the interpretive theorist must develop and then work upon if a sense of the context within which action is located is to result.

Hats-on Harry, Off-at-seven George, Handle-it-yourself Fred, and the Eternal Flame Edward who never goes Out[7]

Among first-level supervisors in American police agencies are patrol sergeants. These men (and they are, overwhelmingly, men) differentiate their position from those of patrolmen on the assumptive grounds that they are "responsible for the activities of patrolmen" whereas patrolmen are "responsible for the activities taking place on their beats." This seemingly clear-cut contrast is pregnant with operational difficulty for it is apparent to anyone spending more than a trivial amount of time within large police departments that "being responsible for the men" can be demonstrated in a variety of ways under a bewildering set of circumstances. It is by no means clear what it is that can properly be called supervision, leadership, management within these organizations. Yet, tasks do get performed, calls answered, budgets drawn up and expended, reports written, and, in fact, all members of the organization do give testimony to the significance of the three stripes worn on sergeant sleeves.

This is simply to say that chaos does not permeate police agencies --
though on occasion such a beast does arise. If not chaos, then, some sort
of order does sustain a precarious existence. One way in which such an
order can be described is to examine the more or less routine activities
of a set of differentiated organizational members and note how it is they
maintain relations with others who contrast in rank, status, or any other
organizationally-relevant ways to them. Space does not permit lengthy
analysis but, in bare detail, I will explore some activities associated with
an organizational role I have elsewhere labelled the "station house sergeant"
(Van Maanen, forthcoming). This is an example of form moreso than content
since my purpose is mainly to highlight certain key assumptions embedded
within what I regard as interpretive method and theory.

The main preoccupation of the station house sergeant is to avoid
entanglements in the incident-specific world of policing. From a carefully
built-up perspective upon ▆▆▆▆▆▆ work-a-day duties, the station house
sergeant believes his job is to "efficiently run groups" rather than to
"effectively police a given district." In the words of one such sergeant,
"my job is to coordinate what the troops are up to because, legally, I
can't tell 'em what to do." What this sergeant alludes to in this remark is
an arrived at interpretation for his official activities. He is signalling
a style of supervision characterized by its relative unconcern for the
situationally defined police task. As such, the style has more in common
with non-patrol supervisory and administrative ranks in the agency than
with other patrol sergeants or, more critically, patrolmen. Whatever
opportunities exist for the station house sergeant to become involved in
particular police-citizen matters are studiously avoided. It is, in short,
an administrative role that is sought and it is, by and large, an administrative
role that is played.

This begs, of course, ███ the question of what activities could be
said to compliment the administrative tastes of the station house sergeants.
Consider the following activities as examples organized around the sergeants
use of space inside and outside the station house.

As the label implies, station house sergeants can be located most
readily in the station house. The amount of time these sergeants spend
on the streets is largely a result of what these sergeants deem proper
reasons for being on the street. These reasons are few in number. They
respond to the so-called 'hot' or 'trouble' calls as dispatched from central
communications. Such calls provide an occasion to not only observe their
charges in action and be aware of any peculiar occurances relevant to
squad activity, but also provide an occasion to exercise supervisory perogatives
such as assigning paperwork to patrolmen on the scene, calling in investigatory
personnel, advising responding officers as to search or interview protocal,
and, perhaps most frequently, encouraging patrolmen to "get back to work."
Other occasions for street activity include "meets" with patrolmen arranged
through dispatch at patrol officer requests such that reports could get
delievered and signed; "cruising" the district in an apparent effort to be
"on the air" and, symbolically at least, part of the action; "breaking-in"
the new man assigned to a district by accompaning him on portions of his early
tours of duty in the district, mostly the inexperienced or rookie officers;
"checking-out" men assigned fixed posts on special duty such as parades,
civic celebrations, and sporting events; and so on. What is distinctive
and striking about the actions of the station house sergeant when he is
not in the station house is, however, not these activities _per se_. What is
distinctive is his apparent unwillingness to become involved in any of the
specific police incidents encountered on the street. Station house sergeants
are careful to avoid being first on the scene at any call; the rule being, with
few exceptions, "first car in owns the call (and takes the paper)." They

are respectful and even watchful of the autonomy granted patrolmen to handle

given calls in the way responding patrolmen themselves feel appropriate. They

are eager to dispel any notion that they are themselves "in on the action"

and justify their street presence by reference to supervisory responsibility

as dictated by departmental procedure. If asked about what legal or quasi-

leagal action an officer should take, these sergeants will of course respond

but virtually always qualify their response with the reminder to the questioning

officer that it is "his call" and he should do what he thinks correct.

What station house sergeants consider their 'real work' takes place in

police buildings -- central headquarters and the precincts. Here, station house

sergeants listen to 'radio,' knowingly and skeptically monitoring selected

details of the activities of their men. Here, sergeants make themselves

available to the "troops" to sign the various documents of their concern --

arrest reports, overtime statements, equipment releases, etc.. Here, roll

call is held at the beginning of each shift during which station house

sergeants hold forth with a captive audience of patrolmen. In restless yet

bored student-like pose, the "troops" endure lectures delievered with

occasional evangelic fervor about the importance of appearance (haircuts,

uniform upkeep, clean patrol vehicles, etc.), the sins of laziness and bad

attitudes, the peculiarities of some (always unnamed) patrolmen -- their long

lunches, choice of on-duty beverage, or failure to master proper grammatical

form and spelling on submitted reports. Moreover, station house sergeants

lay territorial claim on the station house itself. Unless patrolmen are

involved in interrogating suspects, questioning witnesses, writing reports,

or attending to other narrowly defined police work, they have no business in

the station. Frequent or lengthy visits by a patrolmen without obvious police

work to conduct are seen as time-wasting pecadillos and such patrolmen are

shooed back to the streets .

In essense, station house sergeants sidestep, whenever possible, practical or operational involvement in the incidents that constitute police business. By their unwillingness to attend to routine police calls, by scrupulously avoiding having to make legally responsible police decisions, by turning over virtually all accountability for police-citizen encounters to patrolmen, these sergeants constructed a readily recognized role within the organization. More to the point, it was a role they could support and rationalize quite easily. Using the imagery of a bureaucratic, sometime paramilitary organization, station house sergeants have a valuable resource at hand to justify their actions (or, better yet, inactions). To such supervisors, organizations are systems where the practices and relations of the membership are intended to closely mirror the rules which define the division of responsibility (and competence) between the ranks (and between the specialities). By refusing to grant any validity to the claim that these formal rules (Van Maanen, 1980) were situationally specific, vague, or rarely obvious, station house sergeants limit their commitment to and involvement in the field. If an incident arises calling for some judgement as to whether or not to investigate further a given citizen allegation of, say, a residential burglary, station house sergeants are quick to call in the detectives to make such choices. That the matter could be an investigatory or patrol concern is not seen as negotiable since the station house sergeant will invoke an official statement of purpose and function thus defining the matter as "out of his hands."

The response of patrolmen to this style of supervision is, in large part, one of derision. As the nicknames for station house sergeants suggest -- Duck-out Dick, By-the-book Brubaker, All-fears Malloy -- patrolmen regard the style as something of an artform that serves to protect a particular sergeant from the necessity to make operational (read, responsible) decisions. It is seen as a form of "buck passing," of "running away from one's duties," of "concentrating on the bullshit." For this reason, station house sergeants are often

characterized as cowardly -- though not (ordinarily) in the physical sense. They are afraid to become involved in specific incidents because they fear making a wrong decision and therefore blurring their image of competence with superior officers with whom they are seen by patrolmen as being cozy. For patrolmen to make such judgements, certain assumptions are required. Most critical is the widespread belief that one wins acclaim or favor from the higher-ups in police organizations by playing by the rules and, as is frequently heard, "keeping one's nose clean." Such an assumption mediates whatever personal irratation a patrolman may feel toward his boss since it offers an explanation grounded upon a decipherable motive. "Bookmen" such as "Hats-on Harry" or "Off-at-seven George" could then be tolerated if not approved by their supordinates.

I must note finally that station house sergeants could hardly be expected to exist as a recognizable type were it not for their counterparts, the street sergeants. Briefly, whatever a station house sergeant is, a street sergeant is not. In essense, the contrasting supervisors viewed themselves first and foremost as "practical policemen." For a street sergeant, the significance of the stripes he wears is a bothersome matter since it is unclear to him outside of (and occasionally inside) a particular incident just what being a sergeant entails. These sergeants, for reasons far too numerous to specify here, find little difference between policing as a patrolman and policing as a sergeant. The irony of their elevated rank lies in what I would characterize as their sense of being the "odd man out." Despite their professed attraction to street-level work, they believed they could intervene in only some police matters and then they could intervene only with difficulty. No longer dispatched directly to calls, street sergeants live within an shadowy occupational world where charges of "poaching," "oversupervision," "sticking their nose into another's business," "neglecting their duties," and "undersupervision" were ever present. Though negotiable, such charges are to be minimized according

to street sergeants since if they became widespread the police officers under
their command (and above them) will make their daily life most uncomfortable.
Underpinning this view is what Bittner (1970:27) regards as a key to under-
standing police behavior on the street, the virtually unlimited granting of
"reciprocal tolerance" by organizational members toward one another. The legal
mandate of police in society (as interpreted by the police) is important
here as are other sources of justification for such tolerance. Perhaps of
most importance however is the deeply held notion in police circles that to
become involved in another's incident is to invite trouble. Though subject
to less public ridicule and private slander, street sergeants walk a very
thin line when maintaining the respect (and obedience) of their men.[8]

Comment

I have tried to provide a very quick treatment of some of the features
involved in an interpretive approach to organization theory. Four points will
suffice for elaboration. First, the materials presented are primarily first-
order data (Van Maanen, 1979). They represent materials upon which the
interpretive theorist must work. That they are recovered and presented with
difficulty and more than a little ambiguity should be an obvious point but
one which does not deflect from the underlying necessity to get at concrete
behavior and situated participant accounts for such behavior if any analysis
is to be forthcoming. Second, the materials are cast in light of a context
and world within which language has subtle shades of meaning, actions are
subject to multiple interpretations, and actors have creative roles to play
and replay. In short, there is a culture of reference within which described
matters can be seen as accurate or inaccurate, contrived or authentic. Third,
the meanings which adhere to the units selected for attention are to be located
in the concrete practices in which the studied actors are engaged. The meanings
are intersubjective to be sure but are not reducable to individual psychological

states, beliefs, or propositions. In this sense, the meanings are neither

subjective or objective but represent what lies behind both. There is, for

example, no detached or outside stance from which one could gather and

present basic data on what organizational rules mean or what the actions

of One-way Omahandro signify to others in the organization. When one tries

to understand a given rule or the behavior of a   particular actor within

a delimited social setting, one deals with a cultural world of interpretation

(and interpretations of interpretations). This is to say that meanings are

not "simply in the minds of the actors" but are buried in the brute, routine,

mundane social activities of the collective group being examined. The meanings

must be seen as modes of social relations, of systems of mutual action. Fourth,

the materials suggest the particular intentionality and empathy demonstrated

by the actors of interest are themselves products of a prior system of

meaning. Yet, meaning is for a particular actor to be found in a particular

situation. It is about something, it signifies something and therefore exists

within a field of meaning. A station house sergeant is a meaningful term

to a patrolmen to the extent that street sergeants operate as a contrast

within the field. It is meaningful to the extent that notions of the "good

call," "poaching," "swarming," "real police work," "trouble," and "trust"

are also meaningful to patrolmen. The occupational culture of policemen --

the shared meanings, practices and symbols that constitute their world --

is multivocal, overdetermined, complex, and conflictual. To describe the

internal logic or situational rationality of such cultures is the aim of

the interpretive organizational theorist.

The irony of such a mandate should not be lost. For if one rejects the

romantic idea that the world of signification can be reduced to products of

self-consciousness or the positivists idea that human action carries with

it essense-like qualities, one can locate no neutral position from which to

study the world. Both the observer and the observed are over their heads in

a culture of preexisting meaning and the circle is closed for there can be

final recounting or verification procedure to fall back upon.[9] Consider Paul

Rabinow's (1979:14) comments on the problems of interpretation.

> "Ultimately a good explanation is one which makes
> sense of the behavior. But to agree on what makes
> sense necessitates consensus; what makes sense is
> a function of one's readings; and these in turn are
> based on the kind of sense one understands."

In terms of my argument, the explanatory aim of the interpretational

mode of organizational analysis does not seek a truth that extends beyond

the elusive culture of study -- a culture that is always "lived-in" for

one can never be free of cultural constraint. Consider Bertrand Russell's

(1927:29-30, quoted in Douglas (ed.), 1979: 345) famous analogy.

> "Animals studied by Americans rush about frantically
> with an incredible display of hustle and pep and at
> last acheive the desired result by chance ... Animals
> observed by Germans sit still and think and at last
> evolve the solution out of their consciousness."

To stress constructs such as the "self," the "organization," the "rules,"

or "empirically based theory" as somehow self-evident sources of meaning

free from cultural variation is to pursue the lost ark. Such constructs (and

the massive energy devoted to searching for them) are dependent upon a

context for their own meaning and it is the very context that the constructs

are thought to rise above.[10]

The message is a gloomy one I suppose for paradigm-expectant social

scientists (many organizational theorists among them). My own view on the

explanatory power of any science is that it rests upon its subject. If

the subject is one whose behavior is universal and whose activity can be

understood as a context-free operation, then, establishing the objective

validity of formal conjectures can be accomplished and the explanatory

power of the science is strong.[11] The explanatory power of the social or human

sciences is another matter since its subjects think, talk back, demonstrate

will and insight all within ever shifting settings and situations. Short of

some grand inquisition whereby the heretics are to rounded up and out, there will not be an age of The Paradigm in organization theory. As Rabinow and Sullivan (1979:4) nicely put it: "The cargo-cult view of the about-to-arrive science just won't do."

If organization theory cannot follow the same path as the modern investigation of the physical world, what path are we to follow? Here, I believe that the more paths followed the better.[12] This is of course not the direction I have selected for my own work which wanders off in what I have been calling the interpretive direction (although, in truth, there are many interpretive directions). But, within the field as a collective, many projects, styles, theoretical aims and uses need be present to play off one another. In the dialectic that results, something resembling advances, contributions, and refutations can exist such that occasionally grounds for acceptance (and challenge) of certain directions may be agreed upon. That there can be no functionalism without a field to which it can be contrasted and positioned is the basic point. Orthodoxy is the villain be it of symbolic interactionist, Marxist, or ethnomethodological shape. Orthodoxy in all of its disguises is but ideology and, as such, it is the subject of investigation, not the consequence.

Such high-sounding sentiments must also be applied to interpretive circles. What interpretive theorists do best is to recover the richness of meanings found in the cultures of study. Whether we write of police cultures, factory cultures, or managerial cultures, the essential strength of the interpretive bent lies in its opposition to the universals and context-free notions which often inform current opinion as to the nature of such worlds. This opposition and criticism must of course continue but it must not do so naively, in ignorance of developments occuring outside interpretive circles. Two such developments strike me a particularly important in the organization studies area.

Critical Theory: [13] Growing from the so-called Frankfurt School, critical theory signals a return to an interpretive history in the American social sciences (Giddens, 1976). Greatly simplified, critical theory seeks to locate the "hidden constraints" of particular social situations by tracing back the historical transformations surrounding such situations. Marxist in tone and origin, the materialist assumption of critical theory (as a limiting condition upon any interpretive formulation) is critical to all forms of organization study for it reminds the investigator that his own constructs are tied to received values, practices, and institutions. There is need then for continued criticism, both theoretical and political, of all descriptions and explanations of the social world. To the interpretive theorist, the meaning is -- in McLuhan's aphorism -- the message. Meanings are ultimately practical, they do something. To unravel the meaning of police cultures (or, more properly, parts of police cultures) is to point to the derived solutions to some fundamental problems of existence (domination and submission, identity and role, clarity and ambiguity). The aim of interpretive studies can not simply be more interpretation in the service of creating a theory, even a carefully contained one. Theory is ultimately secondary to experience and thus is little more than a scaffolding constructed and demolished according to the uses it can be put. There must be concern for such uses in the sense that the "good" becomes discussable rather than assumed. An ethical consciousness permeates critical theory and it is a consciousness that should spread.

Semiotics and Structuralism: [14] In the same fashion that critical theory directs attention toward the "hidden constraints" of social situations, semiotics and structuralism seek to "decode" explicit aspects of social life such that deeper, implicit meaning can be read. The brilliant writings of Roland Barthes provide instructive displays of semiotic projects. In Mythologies (1972), for example, Barthes sets out to examine the normally

hidden set of rules, codes, and conventions through which meanings particular
to specific social groups (i.e., those groups in power) are rendered
universal and 'given' for the whole society (though, as Barthes reluctantly
suggests, not without difficulty). Structuralists, of which Mary Douglas,
Levi-Strauss, Michael Foucault, and Edmund Leach are prominent if diverse
representatives, attempt to expose the arbitrary nature of all cultural
phenomena thus linking the "perfectly natural" (in kinship, economics,
communication, etc.) to the unseen ordering of complex but decipherable
(and formal) meaning systems. The analogy that social life is structured
like a language underlies structuralist writing.

What semiotics and structuralism offer the interpretive theorist
interested in organizational life are thoughtful clues by which ethnographic
materials can be ordered and read. Ethnographers are notorious 'theory-users'
rather than 'theory-builders' and semiotics and structuralism offer theories
that are perhaps closer to ethnographic material than most social science
theories. That station house sergeants are meaningful only when their
counterparts, the street sergeants, are included in the analysis is a useful
example in this regard. Style is the glossy surface upon which messages
are to be read by the sign-sensitive analyst. We say more than we mean for
in the very act of saying something a mode is selected which carries its
own subtle but significant message. This paper announces its meaning in
the very form it takes: the seriousness conveyed by the careful margins and
footnoted subtext; the forum in which it is presented; the typewritten
formality of the text; the linear arrangement of words and sentences; the
careful segmentation of parts; and so forth. One needs not to read the paper
to offer a well-grounded interpretation of its contents (see, Manning, 1990).
By the call to examine what stands behind the ordinary, the obvious, the
taken-for-granted, the literal, the everyday, structuralism and semiotics
push the interpretive theorist into new empirical domains.

Afterthoughts

Rereading my scattered thoughts presented in this paper, I am somewhat
troubled by my apparent inability to define more precisely the interpretive
approach to organizational studies. At root perhaps is my assumption that
all organizational studies (and theories) are fundamentally interpretive.
In the final analysis, all organization studies rely on the insight and
judgement of the investigator becasue there are no forms of verification that
transcend the assumptions built into the technique and theory followed by the
investigator. Differences in the field are then nonarbitrable by further
study. If you understand my findings, good; if you don't, your assumptions
about my work are, at best, faulty, at worst, blind. Organization theory is
an artform practiced by those of us with theoretical bias and methodological
preference. For example, as an ethnographer, I work with symbolic forms,
words, images, artifacts, behaviors by which people express themselves and
and their particular form(s) of life. As an interpretive theorist of such
forms of expression, I invariably move away from the culture of study to
consider what it is that gives particular coherence or thematic unity to
these forms. My work oscillates back and forth between what Geertz (1976)
calls "experience-near" (ethnographic detail) and "experience-distant"
(cultural characterizations) concepts. It is this hopping back and forth
that makes any approach to building organization theory difficult to describe
because the theory that results is not to be fully realized in either
"experience-near" or "experience-distant" concepts but in what is, at heart,
an artistic melding of the two.

That investigators emphasize one set of concepts over others is the
axiom with which I began this paper. My own work leans toward the "experience-
near" (though, to again paraphrase Geertz, "you-don't-have-to-be-a-station-
house-sergeant-to-know-one"), others toward the "experience-distant." Since

I have used the body of this paper to note a few of the problems created by experience-distant notions, I will close by considering some problems raised by the use of experience-near ones. Two seem important.

First, contextual analysts put great emphasis upon faithfully describing the culture of interest. Theoretical concerns are secondary to this aim although certain findings as described within the culture of interest literally demand more than passing attention. Since hypothesis testing is not an issue or concern, the contextual analyst is relatively free to look wherever he chooses for theoretical devices to frame certain findings. This "bricoleur" style of piecing together findings by means of whatever theory seems to fit is not in itself a problem but the fact that the contextual analyst may seldom look very far is. The observation that participant-observation studies have never led to an alternative to positivism or functionalism in American sociology is a case in point (Roberts, 1976; Johnson, 1975). Participant-observation has, by and large, formed a sort of methodological subculture of its own within the mainstream and has failed to look outside that mainstream for theoretical options. Among those who profess a most practical interest in theory, a much wider search is in order. Current developments in critical theory, structuralism, and semiotics will help.[15]

Second, contextual analysts who work with culturally explicit materials often exhibit what could be called a "failure of nerve." By and large, they do not draw out their own readings of the materials they gather with much force or commitment. To appreciate the subtle nuances of style, the dictates of perceived environments, or the cunning logic of a given social practice is not to necessarily support such styles, dictates, or logic. Yet, silence on such matters is common. The investigator is often a nervously

depicted "anybody" without visible presence or position in the scheme of
things. There is nothing inherently regulatory or conservative about
interpretive work. It is true that as practiced in the analysis of modern
forms of work organization, it is usually the status quo which is presented.[16]
But, it is not the case that merely to study the way in which a given order
is put together implies that the investigator finds the discovered order
pleasing or satisfactory. There are, of course, examples of investigator's
going native and adopting without thought the views of their informants, of
mindless ethnographies detailing endless minutiae of everyday life without
purpose or direction, and of interpretations carefully premised within a
rationality of control (both knowingly and not). Such examples must be
recognized and, insofar as possible, exposed to other accounting schemes.
But, there are also numerous interpretive studies conveying an author's
outrage (or resonance) with the practices described and explained. Marsha
Millman's The Unkindest Cut (1977) is an example here as is Peter Manning's
The Narc's Game (1980). To take phenomenology seriously and to offer up
interpretations within such a framework is not to always put aside the "ought"
questions for the "is." My reading of what I regard as exemplars invariably
lead to moral judgement -- on the part of both the writer and the reader.
That there should be more of such work is a piety although it is well worth
reminding ourselves of the ultilitarian nightmare possible when the notion
of the "good" is abandoned or rendered fully relative to the perspectives
of the subjects or users of cultural study.

To draw out the larger implications of interpretive work may indeed be
of pressing concern. There currently is something of a cultural bandwagon
upon which organizational theorists and practitioners are jumping. Culture
has become something of a catch-all justification for the actions of both
individuals and organizations (Schein, 1981). People do enact, negotiate, and

otherwise direct their lives within cultural and subcultural contexts but
there is nothing natural or necessarily decent about these contexts. This
is typically an implicit and unstated assumption informing much interpretive
work. The challenge lies in making such an assumption explicit by envisioning
some of the consequences that might follow were things organized in different
ways. Certainly we would learn more about theorists and perhaps even organizations
were this the case.

NOTES

1. This paper was written for a symposium on Paradigm Diversity held at the Annual Meetings of the Academy of Management, San Diego, August 2, 1981. Support for the writing was provided by: Chief of Naval Research, Psychological Sciences Division (code 452), Organizational Effectiveness Research Programs, Office of Naval Research, Arlington, Virginia, 22217; under Contract Number N00014-80-C-0905; NR 170-911.

2. I have in mind "causal models" in particular within which preselected and investigator-defined "independent" variables are estimated and yoked (by various means) to a criterion or "dependent" variable. There is nothing inherently quantitative about such an enterprise although it is a form such models often take. The root metaphors and surrounding imagery in the model-building domain are scientific. For a lively discussion of how such metaphors and imagery shape practical activity, see, Lakeoff and Johnson, 1980.

3. In contrast to the scientific imagery of the model-builder, the context-builder's imagery is that of the craftsman (Mills, 1959). Although the organization theorist may follow scientific norms of discourse, there is, to the context-builder, nothing scientific about the activity. The organization theorist is then something of a contemporary social historian working with very imprecise data -- observed behavior and conveyed or imputed thought. The organization theorist as obsessed by puzzles that can never be solved and endlessly curious about fellow creatures who claim to do things together (ie, organization) is always forced to read between the lines and fill in the awesome indexicality (in Garfinkel's (1967) phrase) of social life.

4. In addition, Gusfield suggests that two transformations are critical for such a label and image to stick within society. While I can hardly do justice to his intricate analysis, the first transformation involves converting the partial and essentially ambiguous information available on the target phenomenon into fact (ie, we collect "accident facts," not accident guesses or estimates); the second transformation is to render such facts dramatic (ie, "will you be killed by a drunk driver?").

5. See, for example, Pfeffer and Salancik (1977) 1978 and, most recently, Pfeffer (1981). This position appears to me to take relatively little account of the language of everyday use, the situatedness of all interaction, and tacit definitions of the situation. These everlooked features are emphasized most clearly in the work of the Chicago School (Ferris, 1970), contemporary urban ethnographers (Suttles, 1968; Spradley, 1970), and among such people as Dalton (1959), Becker (1970), Hughes (1958) and (early) Goffman (1959). Under one label, this viewpoint can be cast as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) but it is a viewpoint with many variations (Rock, 1979). I seek my own intellectual models in this tradition.

6. To some extent, model-builders observe organizational action and then look for reasons to explain such action. The context-builder sees instead end results and searches for the generative social practices of such results. It is the shift in metaphors that creates some confusion; from choice and motive to procedure and results. I must add also that the study of motives as an adequate explanation for

human behavior has been a dubious enterprise since Mills (1940) and all but impossible (for me, at least) since Peters (1958) and Lyman and Scott (1970). Social psychologists seem to be catching up to sociologists in this regard under the general topic of attribution theory. See, Jones and Nisbett (1972) for an example of research and Kelley (1980) for a review of research.

7. In this section, I draw upon my own participant-observation work in a large, urban police agency (for methodological details, see Van Maanen, 1978). I consider the agency a rather ordinary, unspectacular police department within which such general organizational processes as "supervision" and "management" can be easily investigated. I should note however that while I believe participant-observation produces some of the most interesting and evocative accounts of organizational life to be found in the literature, it also suffers from several significant flaws. In particular, the absense in many works of any consistent analytic framework has guaranteed much participant-observation work marginal status within organization theory. For all the Chandler-esque prose and for all the authenticity and close detail, participant-observation is but a method is need of supplemental procedures (Roberts, 1976). In the example of the text, I give testimony to the dangers of participant-observation by omitting any depiction of the larger social, political, and economic context within which police in general and police sergeants in particular operate. This is an omission I am trying to correct (Van Maanen, 1980b).

8. In a similar study conducted in England in the early 70's, Chatterton(1975) makes virtually the same kind of distinction among first-line police supervisors as I do. Chatterton's "administrators" are my "station-house sergeants" and his "practical policemen" are my "street sergeants who, rather than seeing themselves as the "odd man odd," use the phrase, "spare part." Rereading Dalton (1959), I am also struck by his contrast between two executive/supervisory types: those to whom means -- method, procedure, rules -- are paramont (ie, station-house sergeants); and those to whom means are subordinate to ends (ie, street sergeants).

9. This view comes close to what Burrell and Morgan (1979) regard as the centerpiece of the "Radical Humanist Paradigm" as expressed by Satre's (1968) existential dilemma and Habermas's (1974) hermeneutic circle. As Burrell and Morgan suggest, the line between radical humanism and interpretive social science is often difficult to draw. I find it impossible.

10. The essential character of interpretive theory is that it does not seek to locate what stands behind culture -- the search for some context (e.g., economic, political, structural) that is itself a self-evident source of meaning. In the main, interpretive theorists regard culture as conceptual (and, hence, constitutive) moreso than instrumental. While a group can not cheat nature (or, to a lesser degree, arrived-at economic and political arrangements) and survive, there are many ways to survive. The quest for "determinants" of culture lies outside interpretive traditions. This quest for universal building blocks in social theory separates most Marxists, structuralists, ethnomethodologists, linguists, developmental and cognitive psychologists from interpretive theorists. I cover some features of this distinction in a later, somewhat breathless, section of this paper.

11. This is essentially the Kantian position. I am aware that even as a basis for the study of nature it has been undermined consistently. That ultimately it rests on a false subjective/objective dichotomy is Popper's (1969) well known position. I find Ziman's (1959) ideas helpful in the sense that science procedes "as if" the dichotomy were real and is assessed primarily by its accomplishments. The dichotomy is then a useful rule-of-thumb. Bateson (1980) has recently argued against the usefulness of the dichotomy in biological sciences. My point here is merely the impossibility of laying claim to a "science" of human behavior regardless what status one grants the subjective/objective dichotomy.

12. This is not the position taken by Burrell and Morgan (1979) who argue for a sort of perspective purity. Dialogue between interest areas in organization theory would seem under perspective pure conditions to become even more strained than at present with a possible result being the increased parochialism across the field. I do agree with Burrell and Morgan on the fact that we tend to spend too much effort positioning ourselves (and repositioning) with respect to other schools of thought. I would hope that the tone of this paper is conciliatory since that is the purpose of the symposium rather than hostile or overprotective.

13. Habermas (especially 1971, 1975) is perhaps the classic current source, Marcuse (1964) the most widely read. Jay (1973) provides a readable and thorough social history of the Franfurt School. Critical theory is located by Burrell and Morgan (1979) under the radical humanist banner.

14. Useful primers in this area include Culler (1976), Hawkes (1977) and Leach (1976). Dense examples of the perspective pushed hard include Douglas (1967), Foucault (1978) and, of course, Levi-Strauss (1966). Less dense (and more fun) is Hebdige (1979). Durkheimian sociology follows structural precepts and there is a mainstream tradition in research on social encounters which shows overwhemingly that social interaction (at least among the white, middle-class Americans) can usefully be analyzed as firmly governed by rules, codes and conventions (e.g., Goffman, 1959). In recent publications (1973; 1981), Goffman has taken a far more explicit structural stance than apparent in his earlier work.

15. The search might reasonably also incorporate the inclusion of a wider array of studied populations. To a certain extent, interpretive theorists of which symbolic interactionists are prominent have sought their fields of study in unusual contexts with more or less deviant groups -- the "nuts, sluts, and perverts" school. Interpretive work with "normal" groups in "ordinary" organizations is needed; in part, because it is missing; and, in larger part, because it is essential to understanding organizations top-down as well as bottom-up.

16. Such studies are usually marked however by an explicit consideration of the sort of teeth-griting resistance to the status-quo (or, to the powerful) found in most organizations. Subcultural resistance finds expressive form in many ways and researchers are usually compelled to note how such resistance displays the fundamental tension between those in control and those in subordinate positions (see, Hall et al. (eds.), 1976). Such resistance is however often ironic in the sense that it serves to reinforce rather than alter the status quo (see, Kanter, 1977 and Willis, 1977).

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